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ABSTRACT

Surveys of American Indian parents and administrators of schools with significant Indian enrollment in the Northwest examined Indian parent and community involvement in education and school practices to promote such involvement. Responses from 60 administrators outlined school practices related to direct parent participation, school communication with parents, use of parents and community members in the classroom, soliciting family and community opinions for school planning purposes, inclusion of parents and community in school governance and decision making, and school efforts to enlist tribal representatives as a support system. Results suggest a preference for informal group gatherings, preferably with meals. Most schools seemed to overlook the value of tribal council involvement, which could be a key to gaining community support. Parent survey forms were mailed to 200 Indian education parent advisory committees with instructions to have 5 involved and 5 noninvolved parents answer and return them directly. Of 245 surveys returned, 60 percent were from "active" parents or family members. Despite their designations as active and inactive, the groups differed little in terms of involvement. Overall, the surveys suggest more parent involvement than is generally assumed. Neither survey revealed many innovative practices, although the parent survey suggests the need for parent education, parenting classes, and culturally relevant activities. (SV)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

ED 361 125

DEPICTION STUDY OF INDIAN PARENT/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT IN NORTHWEST SCHOOLS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INDIAN PARENT/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

Introduction

Involvement and support of Indian parents in the educational process of their children is essential to increased educational success. Although the need has long been recognized in major studies and reports, such as The Meriam Report of 1929, and the Kennedy Report of 1969, our literature search of March 1991 turned up very little information regarding successful practices in the area of parental involvement of Native American families. Yet parental involvement is still being cited as a crucial need. The Indian Nations at Risk report of 1991 lists it as one of the ten goals for Indian education. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Regional Needs Assessment found parental involvement, in general, as a top priority area. The Policy Board of the Research and Development Program for Indian Education listed parental involvement as the top priority of Indian education in the region.

This report reflects the findings of a literature search and two surveys accomplished over the past two years. The project will result in the design and implementation of a model for increasing Indian Parent involvement and community support of education in an Indian community.

We feel that some brief background must be presented to help clarify the magnitude of the task which we have undertaken.

Background Information

Indian reservations were created as a solution to the "Indian" problem, or what to do with the Indian population. Generally established by treaty between the U.S. and individual tribes, a common pattern was followed. Ancestral lands were ceded to the U.S. with a portion being reserved for the tribe or tribes to live on. Usually this was land that was not desired by settlers. Because of the confinement to the reserved lands, Indians were no longer able to pursue traditional subsistence practices. The U.S., both as an inducement to sign the treaties, and to meet tribal needs, provided services, goods, and food, thus creating a dependency state of being on reservations, which still is a very real part of reservation life.

A variety of programs have been tried over the years to assimilate the Indians into the mainstream, all of which have been only partially successful. Some of the most common to most reservations include farming (on the least desirable lands),

education, conversion to Christianity, encouragement to leave the reservations and seek employment elsewhere and termination of federal responsibilities. Today, an Indian Self Determination policy (P.L. 93-638) is in effect. PL 93-638 provides for Tribal contracting with government agencies to provide services for themselves.

A typical reservation community consists of residential areas, Tribal offices, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) offices, Indian Health Services (IHS) facilities, businesses and schools. Usually the population is small in number ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand. Fifty to ninety percent (estimated) of the population is Indian, the non-Indian population is usually associated with the BIA, IHS, schools and businesses.

The service providers of the communities have an overwhelming task. Underfunded and understaffed, they have insurmountable tasks to perform.

Indians Living on and Adjacent to Reservations By Selected Characteristics January 1989*

Total Population	949,075
Under Age 16	314,377
Age 16-64 years	574,022
Age 65 years and over	60,676
Unable to Work:	
Student	86,257
Other	103,079
Employed	233,476
Earning $7,000 or more Annual as a percent of total employed, population age 16-64 years	26%
Not Working but Able to Work	211,886
Seeking Work	158,582

Of the 384,686 people aged 16-64 who were able to work, 233,476 had jobs. Of those working, about 65 percent were making $7,000 or more. Of those not working, three quarters were seeking work. Indeed, the size of the group "able to work" but unemployed is almost as large as the working population! Clearly, there are few jobs on or adjacent to reservations, compared to the number of people who

**Source: Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Service Population and Labor Force Estimates, January 1989.*

wish to work. Also there is little information about what these working people were actually doing or what their job future looks like.**

Conclusions of a study of American Indian-Alaska Native youth health states, "American Indian/Alaska Native adolescents reported high rates of health compromising behaviors and risk factors related to unintentional injury, substance use, poor self-assessed health status, emotional distress, and suicide." (Blum et al, Journal of American Medical Association, March 25, 1992)

The constant struggle with economic, socio-emotional, and health related issues tend to preclude education as a very high priority in these communities. Education and its effects are long term whereas simply existing is often a daily crisis situation. Education issues can easily be put off while more crucial immediate tasks need to be attended.

In addition to these crucial factors, some attitudinal factors tend to be detrimental to sound education. Often, there is a barrier between the school and the community. Various reasons are given for this: a negative educational experience of the parents; most interactions with school are of a negative nature; parents don't understand what the school is doing. Often parents become involved only when disciplinary measures are taken against their children. Students often blame the non-Indian teachers for their shortcomings, telling their parents that their poor grades or discipline problems are a result of a teacher not understanding or not liking Indians. Out of respect, many Indian parents hold teachers in high regard and would not want to risk insulting them by criticizing or questioning. There are criticisms of the schools which tend to affect student attitudes toward school in a negative fashion. Because of the history of negative interaction and confrontation between the community and the school, teachers often feel anxious and even fearful in contacts with Indian parents. Indian parents also are uncomfortable in contacts with the teachers.

The typical reservation community is so engrossed in meeting basic needs of the community that support of and active involvement in the educational process has become a low priority item. Education is left up to the schools because it is their area of expertise.

Schools do pursue activities designed to promote more support, and they are successful, but they still feel the need for more support.

***The Demographics of American Indians: One Percent of the People, Fifty Percent of the Diversity.*

A notable exception to the aforementioned pattern is athletics. All factions of the community are involved in and do support the athletic events and the athletes. Community expectations and encouragement is high. As a motivational factor, youngsters look forward to and strive to become athletes.

As noted earlier, our literature search did not reveal any successful examples which would assist in our model, however our surveys are proving to be very helpful.

School Administrators Survey

RDPIE developed and administered a survey of 399 administrators of schools with significant Indian student enrollment throughout the Northwest. Sixty surveys were returned. While low in number, due to unexpected delays in administering because of the forms clearance process, nonetheless the response represents a workable cross section with ample usable data. The survey was intended to help us ascertain promising practices within the region.

Elements of the survey included percent of Indian students in the surveyed school and what techniques have proven to be successful for that school or district for involving Indian parents/community in six categories and levels of participation. These six areas are identified as: 1) direct involvement with school, 2) home support of children's education, 3) school or classroom resource, 4) school planning, 5) governance and, 6) school involvement with tribal governments.

While there were many responses to each item, a few were mentioned repeatedly by several schools. These are compiled below. It will be noted that most of these tend to be the more standard or traditional techniques. All responses were recorded. The survey was to identify practices utilized and deemed successful by the school administrator. No criteria was proposed to measure degree of success. Our interest was to record as many types, by category, as possible. (Number in parenthesis represents the number of responses.)

1. **Direct Involvement** (evidence of participation by parents)	a) Parent/teacher conference (34) b) Open House at school (28) c) Potlucks or dinners (20)
2. **Home Support** (examples of school efforts to communicate with families)	a) Newsletters (32) b) Home visits (22) c) Student handbook (11)

3. **School Resource** (ways to utilize parents and community in school)	a) Community Resource persons (18) b) Paraprofessionals (11) c) Elders (9)
4. **School Planning** (active utilization of family and community)	a) Parent surveys (35) b) Public meetings/hearings (23)
5. **Governance** (inclusion of parent/ community in decision making process)	a) Parent Advisory Committee (36) b) Parents on School Board (11)
6. **School/Tribal Government** (efforts by school to enlist Tribal representatives as support system)	a) Tribal Education Committee (7) b) Parent Advisory Committee (5)

In reviewing the survey results, patterns can be detected which may prove useful to eventual joint efforts by schools and communities to build a support system. As an example, direct involvement efforts by schools surveyed revealed patterns pertaining to formal versus informal gatherings including a preference for informal group gatherings which needs to be explored. Consideration will also need to be given to gatherings with meals as opposed to non-meal meetings. Substance or degree of communication may need to be factored into contact opportunities that schools attempt with parents and communities.

While most schools seem to overlook the value of tribal council involvement, survey responses demonstrated some successful efforts at communicating with Tribal government. This very likely is a key element in gaining support of the Indian community and will be explored further. Regular newsletters keeping parents informed, along with home visits and utilizing community persons in the classrooms proved beneficial and is worthy for other schools to consider.

Indian Family Survey

A survey of Indian parents/guardians was conducted in January 1992. In addition to the six levels of involvement in the administrators survey the parents were asked to make suggestions for increasing involvement and a general comment item were included.

The survey forms were mailed to 200 Indian education parent advisory committees with the instructions to have 5 involved and 5 non-involved parents answer and send them in directly to the Program.

A total of 245 surveys were returned - 148 (60%) from active parents/families and 97 (40%) from inactive parents/families. The low number of returns may be interpreted as a reluctance to participate in the survey or an indicator of lack of involvement of parents with their children's schools.

Comparisons were made between Active (families actively involved) and Inactive (families not actively involved). For the most part, responses were similar in percentage for listed items in most categories. Comments were also similar except for the tone of Active being more positive with Inactive more negative. Striking exceptions were seen in categories 3 and 4. In category 3, school or classroom resource, 49% of Active serve as volunteers at school compared to 33 of Inactive. An indicator of involvement can be seen when analyzing category 4 - ool Planning which shows 76% Active (73% Inactive) respond to surveys and 71% Active (52% Inactive) visit the school, while only 34% Active (20% Inactive) reported attending school planning sessions.

Highlights

1. **Direct involvement with school**

   - 86% Active (active families) and 83% Inactive (inactive families) reported attending parent/teacher conferences

   - 30% of each group participate in community education classes at school

   - Comments suggest better communication between school and families and more "get-together activities" are needed

2. **Home support**

   - 91% Active and 88% Inactive reported helping their children with homework; 90% Active and 87% Inactive talk with their children about school

   - Inviting school personnel into the home was least practiced. 20% of the Active group invited counselors, 19% invited teachers, and 11% invited principal/administrators; 18% of the Inactive invited counselors, 14% invited teachers, and 11% invited principal/administrators

- Comments suggest doing things with children and teaching culture and values at home

3. **School or classroom resource**

   - Category suggests low involvement with school as only 49% Active and 33% Inactive serve as volunteers at school
   - Comments, though few, suggest offering to serve as a resource for school

4. **School Planning**

   - Data suggests lack of school/family relationship; whereas 72% Active and 56% Inactive make visits to school, only 36% Active and 23% Inactive attend school planning sessions
   - Comments reveal a reluctance to participate in school planning, yet suggest more involvement is needed in this category

5. **School governance/Policy**

   - Surveys reported 61% Active and 38% Inactive serve on parent committees while only 18% Active and 18% Inactive were active with the PTA. Survey analysis revealed that respondents if associated at all, were active either with the parent committee or PTA but seldom both.

   - Comments reflect definite lack of involvement in this category while suggesting a stronger voice by parents including networking with other parents.

6. **School involvement with Tribal Government**

   - 67% Active and 64% Inactive suggested the need for Tribal Council involvement with school

   - 5% Active and 4% Inactive suggested less involvement by Tribal Council with school

   - Strong feelings were expressed about Tribal Council involvement, in areas from culture enhancement, curriculum, policy, and communication to financial support and financial control

7. **Suggestions for involving more families**

- Comments were abundant in supporting more involvement of families with many good suggestions for improving this area, most notably communication and encouragement

8. **Other ideas**

- Comments in this category were generally enthusiastic about promoting more positive involvement with schools including more emphasis on culture learning for Indian students

- A few of the Inactive comments reflected a negative attitude toward schools along with a desire to make things better

Conclusion

The two surveys accomplished their objectives which were to determine practices currently being utilized by both schools and families and ideas schools and families have for improving current practices or developing new ones. Survey responses contained much useful information that verified NWREL's contention that family involvement is needed and wanted, but standard approaches do not achieve the full objective. Additional area-specific approaches developed and implemented cooperatively at the community level can enhance more involvement and support.

While continued research is warranted, enough data has been gathered to develop a model program with provisions of flexibility included to accommodate area-specific needs and capabilities.

Perhaps the most important element of the entire project is the implementation of appropriate family involvement strategies. While many strategies are recommended and research offers many more, the way in which various approaches are implemented in Indian communities determines their effectiveness. For example, the survey suggests extensive attendance at parent/teacher conferences, while survey comments suggests ways to improve the process and entice more parents to participate. Appropriate setting, communication, and collaboration are some suggestions that merit consideration.

There appears to be more involvement than is usually assumed. Note that 50% of the surveys were given to individuals identified by Parent Advisory Committees as non-involved, yet 40% of the responses came from these individuals and all show a high level of involvement.

This is suggested because the RDPIE has experienced a similar assumption in their School Improvement process training. Invariably, those several schools which have chosen increasing parental involvement as a goal, grossly underestimate the amount of parents who are involved. When an actual count is taken, the findings usually exceed the estimate by 30 to 40 percent, with 100 percent representing total involvement.

Neither survey revealed many innovative practices, although the parent/family survey suggests the need for parental education and parenting classes, as well as various culturally (general) influenced activities.

It appears that the Indian community and schools are well aware of traditional practices of parent/community involvement, but feel the need for, and have some suggestions for activities to enhance the involvement.

Recommendations

Recommendations for an implementation model to enhance Indian parent/ community involvement and support:

- An overall goal of establishing a high community priority for active and conscious support of education;
- Increase community-wide interactions through personal contact, oral and written communication;
- Encourage the positive, successful activities now occurring in the community. Expand upon them;
- Institute some innovations to enhance goal achievement. Community team building, parenting classes, parent support groups, Family Math-Family Science, WINGS, Family Connections, "Using Ancestral Values To Address Parenting, and Role Modeling for Future Generations: A Parenting Education Model." Basically methods to enable parents to take a more meaningful, knowledgeable participatory role in their children's education. Include students in "show and tell" activities;

- A closer look at athletics should be taken. Perhaps some of the reasons that enhance community involvement and support of athletics could be modeled. Examples: Athletes are visible. Athletic events are child centered and they are held at a time that is convenient for the community to participate. The community knows and understands athletic activities. They are probably culturally relevant if the process, skills, determination, etc., required of an athlete is a carry over from historical activities of a similar nature which met these needs.

- Accrue accurate data